

Trailing Cotton's Legacy in the South



by Anastasia Howard

As though miles and miles of open land just can't contain this icon of the South, the endless cotton fields of the Pee Dee just close in on the quiet two-lane roads that ramble between Lexington and Marlboro counties. If not for the backdrop of distant pines, poplars and moss, you would swear the green and white fields could clean drop off the edge of the earth. But year after year, that Southern summer sun coaxes the cotton to bloom. Full with the legacy of once being "king."

You can't help but turn your radio dial to favorite nostalgic tunes as you leave I-20 behind and take on the laid-back country feel of Highway 15. Let it ease you into its quiet stretch of history. Let it tease your imagination with the castaways of sharecropper sheds,

Please touch!
Cotton from the field

The Hartsville Museum gives a taste of 19th-century life and is an interpretive Center on the Cotton Trail.



crippled with age and too stubborn to fall. Take comfort in what cotton and the South means to you. But take notice that this stretch of America was once the richest territory in our nation. South Carolina's Cotton Trail is splattered with recollections of living off the fertile land. The

haves and the have nots. Gracious majestic antebellum mansions and proud tin-roof sheds. Endless seas of cotton and rows upon rows of tobacco. Cash-crop plantations and farms braced the state's economy through the labor of the enslaved and then tenant farmers after the Civil War. They are all colorful fabrics of reality's quilt still vibrant with history. And still a destination for the soul.

Bishopville, exit 116 off of I-20, opens the doors to a journey that no book can convey. St. John AME Church, the town's oldest African American church, housed a school for black children in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Cotton Museum brings the past to life, while the nationally known Topiary Gardens of Pearl Fryar inspire you with the beauty of the area today. Mansions from the days when cotton was "king" are towering in both their presence and perseverance. Many are private homes, while others serve to house



community groups.

The trail is no less disappointing as it winds through to Hartsville, Society Hill, Cheraw, Bennettsville, Blenheim and Clio. The route offers such historic stops as the former home sites of Brer Rabbit storytellers Lawrence Faulkner and Simon Brown. While Society Hill takes pride in its Library built in 1822 and the Bellevue Mansion of 1850, Cheraw celebrates its native son, jazz great Dizzy Gillespie. Cheraw is also home to Old St. David's Church, the "planter's church," built around 1770. In Bennettsville, the Marlboro County Courthouse, South Carolina's largest courthouse square, was built around 1881. And Clio, once home to more millionaires than any other place in the country, is rich in the sites of many

remaining mansions, turn-of-the-century structures, and opportunities to actually see cotton ginned.

Travel through in a day, or enjoy the charm of the many bed and breakfasts tucked away in this historic neck of the woods. Enjoy the cozy shopping and antique discoveries that are elsewhere hard to find. Be sure to save time for languid and home-style lunches, state parks, lakes, rivers, annual festivals and home tours. There's a historic charm to the cotton trail. It invites the pioneer in you, the history buff, the discerning mind for the roads traveled by many generations before us. It is nestled in South Carolina's Pee Dee area and ready to nestle into a special corner of your heart.



Right: Families love boating, skiing and fishing Lake Wallace in Bennettsville.

Above: Pearl Fryar has turned his yard into a topiary garden masterpiece.

IF YOU GO...

The South Carolina Cotton Trail
888-427-8720 or www.sccottontrail.org